"Literary" Criticism and Striking Diary

A London Letter From Hugh Walpole

IF I remember rightly in my last letter I indulged myself in a thorough jeremiad, and this has been finished, I am glad to say, as all jeremiads should be, by its consequent falsification. I lamented, I fancy, over the absence here of journals, articles, books of real critical judgment and standard. In the last fortnight we have seen the publication of Arthur Waugh's *Tradition and Change, The Cutting of an Agate* by W. B. Yeats and the publication of three new journals more or less connected with literary criticism. The three journals afford interesting contrasts and should, did they fully live up to their elegant prospectuses, cover the whole range of the English reading public. . . . That they do not so cover it is only another evidence of the fallibility of human endeavor and wisdom. These three new papers are the *Daily Herald*, a Socialist newspaper; the *Athenaeum* and *John O'London's Weekly*.

To call the *Athenaeum* a new paper is, I suppose, an Irish bull of the most flagrant kind; perhaps no other journal has so sedate and honorable a past history. But it has been moribund now for many decades and we all pricked up our ears when we heard that it was to begin all over again with plenty of money behind it and genius at the helm. It was to be, we are told, exactly what we were all hoping for, a weekly devoted entirely to Art and Literature, bold, independent, demanding ruthlessly the highest standards. Two numbers of the new issue have now appeared and they may be said to live up to all that the prospectus promised—nevertheless they are to many eyes and aspiring souls grievously disappointing, being as heavy, funereal, didactic and donnishly superior as the famous Mr. Chadband himself. When I say that, in the second number, an article signed by one of its leading contributors contains the following sentence it will be seen that very little gayety and high spirits are likely to find their way into its future pages. In a review of a book by M. Duhamel Mr. Middleton Murry solemnly announces: "We have no sympathy with optimism; it seems to us now a perverse, short sighted and unworthy creed. . . . It is not a desire to be deliberately indulged by those who should know better."

There's a nice cheery motto for the leading English literary journal. Not "unwise optimism," mind you, or "unbalanced optimism" or "foolish optimism"—not at all, simply "optimism." After that it is scarcely necessary to say that the pages of the new *Athenaeum* are one long superior wail about the decadence of literature, the stupidity and bewilderment of mankind and so on. Not in these pages, under its present management, will be found the creative criticism that we need.

Nor I fear will the literary columns of the *Daily Herald* provide it, but this not because of any pessimism or faintheartedness on the part of its literary editor, Siegfried Sassoon, or such notable contributors as Viola Meynell, Frank Swinnerton and W. L. George. No, rather because our labor leaders of the moment do not seem to consider literature of any very great importance and cram their reviews and Art section into so small a space that there is simply no room for full and energetic opinion. This, perhaps, with time will change. So far no very strong or independent position has been assumed; the reviews have been amiable, clever and superficial.

John O'London's Weekly aims at filling the place taken in earlier days by *T. P.'s Weekly;* that is, it hopes to give the man in the street who is interested in books a fresh impulse toward good reading without weighing his spirit down with a sense of solemn responsibility. Its first number is well written, bright and interesting, but the reviews and notices of books might, I think, without endangering its circulation, be a little less indulgent, a little less general, a little sharper. Perhaps when Mr. Whittier, its admirable editor, is sure of his circulation he will venture further.

In short, with these three papers in front of one, it may safely be said that *The New Statesman* remains, as before, our one critical journal that is able to unite broad minded and honest criticism with a certain gayety and a true sense of beauty.

I would have liked to write about Arthur Waugh's *Tradition and Change*, a volume of literary estimates that does honestly try to find the deep, underlying spirit that connects the literature of yesterday with the literature of to-day, but in the space left to me I must speak of a remarkable book that is causing at the moment much discussion. I refer to *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* by W. N. P. Barbellion, published by Chatto, with an introduction by H. G. Wells. The house of Chatto has again after a rather sterile period in these last years become noteworthy for the excellence and variety of its lists. It is always discovering books of real individuality and character and its production of them is admirable. It certainly ranks now with Heinemann, Macmillan and Secker as one of the four best publishing houses in Great Britain. Barbellion's *Journal* is a very remarkable book. Wells, in his introduction, gives us the main facts of Barbellion's life—a young scientist of great promise he was haunted from the beginning by ill health and at last by the very immanence of his death. The impression of his diary is of a man caught desperately, hopelessly in a cage whose walls close ever, more and more tightly about him. There are many things to be said about it, the beauty of its style, the remarkable observation of its character studies, the sharp and despairing note of its recurrent humor, the strange unimportance of the catastrophe of the war in comparison with the personal catastrophe of approaching death, the critical shrewdness of the notes on art and literature—all this is very remarkable. But most interesting of all is the curious comment it affords on the more recent manifestations of the English novel. Had I not known on absolute first hand authority that this is a perfectly genuine document I might have imagined it a novel from the hand of Miss Dorothy Richardson or James Joyce. It is certainly more vital and poignant than either *A Portrait of the Artist* or *The Tunnel*, but it has the same ruthlessly egotistic analysis, the same disregard for everything external to the narrator, the same piling of minute detail upon minute detail. And this time every word of it is confessed actual experience.

Which surely goes to prove that the new Richardson-Joyce novel is not creative at all, but simply recollected reminiscence.

HUGH WALPOLE.

"Education by Violence"

IT is Prof. Canby himself who has been "educated by violence," and what he learned in Europe during the last year of the war seems to have been a ratification of what he took there, namely, optimism and idealism of the Wilsonian kind. No Wilson man's faith will be shaken by his new book. He affirms that moral earnestness was a great factor in the victory and that American moral earnestness promises vastly, both for ourselves and for all the other nations.

"If I am an optimist instead of a pessimist or a cynic as regards the future," he says, "it is because (if I may borrow a word usually given to the enemy) I believe in the efficiency of the moral earnestness I have watched at work among our allies and in America. We, especially, must keep ours earnest, keep it intelligent, keep it wholehearted."

He bases high hopes on the young soldiers back from the war. He acknowledges—abstinence from wholesale prediction about anything is one of the merits of Prof. Canby—that he doesn't know what they will do with the future. But their experience has "crystallized their minds," given force and direction to their characters and made them impatient of players of politics and of shams and muddling generally. "Johnny comes marching home with a fine new sense that life can be mobilized and made simple if he wishes it, a scrutinizing sincerity and a new consciousness of kinship with his fellow men." The war has changed the civilians too, and all the changes are bound to make for good.

For one thing, both educators and educatees, as well as interested bystanders, have received a new vision of the importance of education and of the desiderata. The author gives an interesting report of the new concern about forming young minds in England and shares a widespread opinion he perceives that old systems and methods everywhere will have to be revised. He has no prescription to offer for revising them. Inspirational and intensive, instead of mechanical job lot teaching, is called for in the colleges.

The friendly nations of Europe, and particularly England, having come to know us through the war, look upon us as being young, fresh, naive, elemental and altruistic—"a breath of fresh air" for their good; it is Mr. Wells who is quoted. However, we are not "quite like that," not "so nobly minded nor so innocent as just now they wish to believe; we are not so altruistic, if indeed it be altruism to desire the only world solution that can save us from turmoil in the next generation. . . . Nevertheless, what a man is thought to be he sometimes is and often becomes. . . . Europe believes and wants us to be idealistic."

Prof. Canby has a try at the topic of the Irish mind, all varieties of which he sampled with enthusiasm. He finds it radically different from the English mind and finds that England and every one else ought to make an effort to understand it. Ireland in some respects is the unhappiest of countries; this is because "all her emotions of patriotism, love, hate, desire for action," especially the last, are suppressed—suppressed not by force but by "circumstances and the conflict of the emotions themselves." What Ireland really needs is "a free fight, legally arranged for, umpired but not interfered with—a continuous performance, in which every Irishman can join without fear of being jailed by a timorous England." A constitutional, not a physical fight, and no peace without victory. "Not until they have fought it out will the Irish mind be cured and realist and idealist compromise in Ireland."

If none of this is precisely a heaven cleaving revelation—if all of it has been said and said before—at least it is ably and pleasantly written and seriously, conscientiously discussed. Also, Prof. Canby includes the best fanciful "piece" about Tanks of several dozen such pieces we have seen and makes the Tank his example for a prospectus of the salvation of man's life and soul through machines—which is an agreeable change from reading about the machine as an agency of enslavement and despair.

"Optimism," he says elsewhere, "just now is the function of America. Western Europe is worn and weary and a little cynical. Europe seeks rest regardless of what may come after. We of the farther West, with our naive enthusiasm and our unsapped energy, must supply the impulse toward larger issues. Help in the battles of the past we offered to the Allies. Escape from the perils of the future may come if we learn to see eye by eye with Britons, Canadians, Australians, as our Poles and Italians and Germans have learned to see eye by eye with us at home *(sic)*. Let us set no bounds to our hope." All right. Let's!

EDUCATION BY VIOLENCE: ESSAYS ON THE WAR AND THE FUTURE. By HENRY SEIDEL CANBY. The Macmillan Company. $1.50.

The Nixolas of Wall Street are preferring blue typewriter ribbons in their hair this spring, except the Bolshevists among them, who, of course, use the red.

Frederic C. Howe is said to be the only author who had a bomb mailed to him in the last batch.